

Socialisation is a  
fundamental  
sociological concept  
sociology essay



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Socialisation is a fundamental sociological concept as it is the way we learn to be a functioning part of the society we are in, how to become a member of the group. Socialisation starts from the moment we are born and there are many arguments that help to show how such socialisation is a continuous process. It continues throughout our lives to help us fit into and be accepted into the many groups within society that we encounter during our lifetime or to just adjust to the changes in our existing community. Although an important social topic that affects all members of society at one time, widespread mainstream literature concerning gender socialisation is difficult to come by.

As mentioned, socialisation starts from the day we are born, the very start, so to help understand socialisation as a whole, developing an understanding of some of its parts is helpful. For this piece of work I shall be focusing on gender socialisation and the impact it has on an individual's socialisation into society. The concept of gender socialisation helps us to understand how the notion of gender, what is expected of individuals as males and females in society and how much it matters. Throughout examining literature for this topic I hope to gain a better understanding of what academic sociologists have to say on this topic. The aim is to try to identify important factors that impact gender socialisation and what literature is current on a similar topic. Has there been a change in attitude to such gendered socialisation and the idea or construction of gender? What are these and how are these developing; i. e. gendered parenting/modern schooling? I also would like to explore nature vs. nurture/boy vs. girl/male vs. female. What are these titles and how are they explained in a sociological way. I hope to gain a greater

concept of gender theories and what is already known about my chosen topic.

To help to develop my understanding of sociological explanations for gender socialisation I have approached several academic texts to help guide and aid my understanding. The first book that I revised is *The Paradoxes of Gender* (1999) by Judith Lorber. Written by Feminist and sociologist Lorber I found that this book challenges the basic idea we may hold of gender and its construction. Lorber argues that gender is a social fact constructed wholly by socialisation. Lorber also notes that gender is also a social institution, comparable to religion, the economy and the family as with it follows consequences and social significance. As a feminist Lorber's work focuses on the need for gender and how it is an inevitable fact that is important not only for the identity of an individual but also for society's construction. While I initially focused on Lorber's Text for a main point of reference I also followed up with works such as *Women, Men and Society* (1999) Renzetti and Curran, *The Gender Trap* (2012) Emily W Kane. These texts form the primary reading for this lit review. I supplemented these with more classical theory books such as *Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Classical Sociological theory* (2006)

What is gender socialisation?

There are many different theories of how gender socialisation happens and how/when it occurs. To help understand gender socialisation, an attempt at a definition is helpful. In its simplest form gender socialisation is how an individual learns and accepts the expected gender norms and values of the culture and society they are born into. Through this education they begin to

develop a sense of identity and their ideas of gender become internalised and guide their behaviour. The Paradoxes of Gender (1994) attempts to explore all areas of Gender and the influences they have on gender identity and wider gender influences.

To help with gender socialisation there are ideas within the wider concept that help to make up a person's gender socialisation. Lorber sees Gender norms as a set of 'rules' appropriate for males and females; they are a set of expectations these expectations help to dictate how men and women are labelled, and therefore how they should behave. The 'rules' and expectations follow on to become internalised and help to form a gender identity, which leads us to the second point highlighted to help gain an understanding of gender socialisation; Gender identity. Sociologists make a clear distinction between gender and sex. A person's 'sex' is biological determined and gender is culturally learnt. Gender identity goes beyond just recognising the physical biological gender characteristics belonging to male and female and identifying them from each other. Gender identity is in fact an internal personal conception of how an individual views themselves as male or female. 'Gender cannot be equated with biological and physiological differences between human males and females. The building blocks of gender are socially constructed'. (Lorber 1994: 17)

How gender socialisation impacts Individuals life choices.

Gender socialisation impacts all areas of social life and therefore does in fact make it an important topic of study. The way an individual is socialised in terms of their gender has an overall impact on daily life including that of

social self, self-concept and the way we conduct personal relationships with others and the perceptions we make. Family, friends, social peers and outside uncontrollable sources are all agents through which socialisation occurs. Religion, mass media education and pop culture are becoming ever increasingly influential over socialisation and how an individual views themselves in respect to their gender. Boys and girls are treated different right from birth, this treatment is often primarily from members of their own environment, such as their parents, siblings and extended families, and the way they are treated helps them to learn the distinction between being male or female. ' Most parents create a gendered world for their new-born by naming, birth announcements and dress. Children's relationships with same-gendered and different-gendered caretakers structure their self-identifications and personalities' (Lorber 1994: 25). Similar to *The Paradoxes of Gender* (2004), *Men, Women and Society* (2002) also addresses the many aspects of what we see as gender. One of the most interesting research topics explored in this book is the concept of how outside choices influence a child's gender socialisation. This is quite often transmitted through simple gestures such as the selection of gender based toys or giving a child a gender based task ' Research does show that children express gender based toy preferences as early as one year of age, but their toy ' choices' may have been inspired even earlier by parental encouragement' (Renzetti and Curran 1999; 74). These seemingly insignificant acts do in fact play a large part in the socialisation of children, and as a result how they develop their gender identity, and therefore their gender socialisation. A common theme throughout all the literature based around gender, explore varying influences on what is gender and how it is constructed.

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## Nature vs Nurture vs gender identity.

An influential and on-going debate amongst sociologists is the argument of the importance of nature vs. nurture in terms of gender socialisation. This ever evolving debate attempts to discover how a biological identity differs over individuals social surroundings to develop a gender identity. A biological and genetic gender identity fuels the 'nature' area of debate whereas society and external influences help to form the idea of 'nurture'. Many argue that to efficiently form an active gender identity, there must be a significant influence from either nature or nurture, but the question continues as to which is more influential, if either. In the Journal article The Nature of Gender Udry attempts to distinguish between what is sex; and what is gender. 'Gender is the relationship between biological sex and behaviour; a theory of gender explains the relationship. A gendered behaviour is the one that defines sex' (Udry 1994; 561). This idea and the theme of this article help to highlight my initial argument about discussing how gender is a social construction. Sex is a given but a person's gender can be perceived differently dependant on how they behaviour. My project will attempt to further this idea by looking into how this behaviour is shaped and learnt.

Children start to come into contact with such norms that define what it is to be masculine or feminine. What is acceptable or unacceptable behaviour is placed upon them in both conscious and unconscious ways. Young boys are taught not to show high emotion, to be strong and powerful whereas girls are showed how to be forgiving, docile and 'ladylike'. If a child shows to be going against such expected 'norms' then there is the chance that they can

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expected to be ostracised from their community or culture, or treated badly. In exceptional circumstances some cultures limit access to basic human rights such as nutrition health care. The treatment of genders in some cultures can also help to reinforce a separate gender identity, for examples in many third world cultures, girls have both different legal and ethical access to education so therefore go on to expect to be treated differently from boys, all based on their gender identity. Toy selection and clothing although seemingly innocent can in fact play a crucial part in gender socialisation. ' Clothing plays a significant part in gender socialisation. As children become mobile, certain types of clothing encourage certain or discourage particular behaviours or activities' (Renzetti and Curran 2002; 70) by this Renzetti and Curran refer to the idea that the way a child is dressed can influence their expected gender identity. For example a female child dressed in a soft, flowing or lace detailed dress would be expected to behave more soft and gentle compared to a male child in Denim jeans who would be accepted for rough and tumble behaviour.

The Psychological and Biological explanations for gender.

To develop a greater understanding of sociological explanations for gender socialisation it is also important to compare and contrast the arguments raised to those of another discipline. As Urdy notes it is important to consider new schools of thinking as social science stems from such thoughts. It is also impossible to study ' gender' without noting the biological differences of human beings. ' Gender has biological foundations' (Udry 1994 ; 571)

One of the most prominent theories about gender acknowledgement comes from the school of psychology. Sigmund Freud's work focused on the importance of childhood and the experience that children experience that children gain throughout it, especially in relation to their gender. Freud noted that gender development is an unconscious experience that occurs through forming a bond with a parental figure. Although this project will focus on primarily the sociological explanations for gender socialisation many texts touch upon further academic disciplines who discuss the construction of gender. It is therefore important to include such references into my project, due to the reference through the literature I have reviewed.

Society's expectations.

Society's expectations of male and female positions within society have also changed over time. Throughout this project I hope to investigate the suggestion that societies tolerant of the changing gender of identity of females has become more positive. A rise in females in the workplace, taking on stereotypical male occupations (fire fighter, police force, and, engineer) and asserting dominance in regards to their position throughout society.

Family socialisation can be seen to encourage female children to display characteristically ' male' but male children are often scorned from displaying any stereotypical female behaviour. Girls are accepted even if they prefer to play with male orientated toys, if they were trousers or show an interest in ' rough and tumble' but if a male child played with baby dolls or wore a dress may experience more negative reaction from society. ' Parents, through primary socialisation, can be seen to be more likely to encourage their

daughters to these masculine qualities then allow their sons to display  
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feminine qualities' (Van Volkon 2003) Here Van Volkon gives weight to the importance primary socialisation, through their family can have on a child. The role of women is seen to be changing in contemporary society, but does this mean that the main social gender identity is getting left behind?

Conclusion.

Looking at gender sociologically helps to reveal societal and cultural proportions of something that is generally thought of as biologically fixed. It helps us to understand how individuals are in a new viewpoint and to help raise and in the end answer new issues and debates surrounding gender. Throughout this project I hope to uncover answers to sociologically questions such as is gender culturally learnt? I am also interested in uncovering how important, or how much influence the family have on gender socialisation, especially in relation to children and childhood. To help with this the work of Emily Kane in *The Gender Trap* (2012) has proved useful. By conducting Interviews and observations of families, parents and children this literature helps to give empirical backing to the texts I have read throughout this review.

Gender socialisation and how it is understood is an ongoing sociological question. Above is a brief overview of what literature I have found useful to attempt to study the subject of gender socialisation. As society can be seen as every changing I am interested in what such change, if any has on the construction and notion of gender. As understood throughout the literature reviewed modern institutions, such as education and the family, have great influence on society and how its individuals are taught how to 'fit in'. Ideas

and the construction of gender are constant with more radical forms of socialisation occurring i. e. gender neutral parenting and its societal impact. Not all the literature I have come across has proved useful to my project research, but this has allowed me to learn mistakes that previous research uncovered and helped to give my research direction and fresh thinking for future research. Throughout wider reading, I have concluded that using more contemporary sources and academic texts helped to give my research weight and productive reference.

Introduction.

The aim of this paper is to examine the influence that family has on gender development and the socialisation process. It will focus on how family influence can affect the construction of gender identity in children from birth through to the first year in primary schooling, around 5-6 years of age and also how the process of socialisation impacts parents. I shall attempt to examine both primary and secondary influences that can shape the gender identity of a family.

The first part of this paper shall look at how becoming a parent can force an individual to have an influence on the gender identity of another and how this process may change their existing gender identity. Secondly this paper shall attempt to examine how the primary socialisation process impacts female children compared with male children.

Society and its actors view the world through a series of lenses: those lenses can include class, race, age and gender. Society is full of stereotypes and the expectations that come with them. Social actors have little choice but to be <https://assignbuster.com/socialisation-is-a-fundamental-sociological-concept-sociology-essay/>

subjected to learning these expectations and to submit to the influence they have on their personal identity. From childhood to adulthood our identity is constantly being reinforced as to what our culture and society wants and sees as acceptable. These stereotypes are expected of everyone but in fact may not be fair to all members of society. As they move through childhood, children are influenced by those that they interact with and are taught right from birth what it is to be a 'successful' member of society.

To understand the sociological concept concerned with the construction of gender, it is important to comprehend first of all the factors that influence one's gender construction. The continuing aim of this paper is to show that it is possible to identify different areas of gender socialization, which vary in their impact on children and those around them, which are essential to build up a gender identity. The best way to understand the concept of gender is to gain a basic knowledge of the concept it. From a structural perspective, gender is seen as the division of individuals within a society into contrasting and complementary social categories; 'boys' and 'girls' into 'men' and 'women'. In this conceptualisation, gendering in the process and a gendered social order can be seen to be the product of some kind of social construction (Lorber, 1994).

Gender based norms can be defined as what we expect from males and females within society whereas gender stereotypes can be seen as how a society generalizes these expectations. Gender based stereotypes are generally first thought of being taught in the home, which are later reinforced by peer interactions, education and schooling, as well as

widespread media contact. It can be seen that the family unit does in fact <https://assignbuster.com/socialisation-is-a-fundamental-sociological-concept-sociology-essay/>

have the largest influence on a child's gender development. Their family members, parents in particular, overtly and covertly teach their child gender roles and reinforce the ideas of gender that they hold about themselves. Both socialisation, primary and secondary, cultural expectations and given biological attributes are all seen to influence an individual's gender identity and as a result has a significant effect on their personal identity.

Vuorinen & Tuunala, (1997) noted that ' Socialisation is the process, through which the child becomes an individual respecting his or hers environment's laws, norms and customs.' (pg45) From this, socialisation can be seen as a fundamental sociological concept and therefore is an important area of analysis. It is the way that individuals learn to be a functioning part of society and how to become an accepted member of the social group in which they are living amongst. Socialisation starts from the moment we are born and it is seen as a continuous process. It carries on throughout our lives, to help us fit and be accepted into the many groups within society that we encounter during our lifetime or to simply adjust to the changes in our existing community. The ' educational' function that Murdock refers to, can also be termed ' socialisation'. The family has the responsibility of transmitting a society's way of life, norms and values to the younger members. This function is an important one as, without culture, the society could not survive, and too much deviation from the norm would disrupt the stability of the society.

Classical sociology has also be long concerned with the process known as socialisation. Talcott Parsons (1959) has written about the functions of the family and identified two functions that he perceives as being ' basic and <https://assignbuster.com/socialisation-is-a-fundamental-sociological-concept-sociology-essay/>

irreducible'. For Parsons, the family provided primary socialisation of children and as a result, produced the stabilisation of the personalities within adults amongst wider society. [Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p. 509]

How children become socialised into different characters can be based on their sex. Through this more focused form of socialisation, boys and girls are repeatedly taught what it means to be male or female and what gender roles will be expected of them is termed gender socialisation (Giddens, 1993).

Although it is an important social topic that affects all members of society at one time, widespread mainstream literature concerning gender socialisation is difficult to come by.

There are many different theories of how gender socialisation happens and how or when it occurs. The two main theories I shall touch upon within this paper are social learning theory and as a follow on to this, social identification theory. These two theories are concerned with the development of gender identity and attempt to explain how the environment around an individual can influence their personal and social gender identity. Social learning theory proposes, established by Bandura (1971) that both gender identity and gender role are learned through a process including observation, imitation, punishment and reinforcement. On the other hand, social identification theory developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979) as a response to Bandura is based upon the notion that an individual portrays certain behaviours or an identity that reflects the social group to which they belong, to help them adapt and adopt the ways of the group.

In its simplest form, gender socialisation is how individuals learn and accept the expected gender norms and values of the culture and society they are born into. Through this education they begin to develop a sense of identity and their ideas of gender become internalised and guide their behaviour. The mass media, wide spread social norms, environmental factors such as living conditions and even language distribute the stereotypes which influence social behaviour and therefore what is expected from gender in society. These external factors contribute to categorizing members of society and placing social label upon them. Examples of labels can include race, class and most importantly for this paper, gender. A shared stereotype is when an expected behaviour or conformity is mutual and accepted by all members of the social group, the way that individuals interpret this label determines how well they are accepted into their social group.

Such gender stereotypes can be seen as a set of 'rules' appropriate for males and females. These rules help to guide how males and females are labelled by their social group and indicate how they should behave, expectations become internalised and form an individual's gender identity. Separate stereotypes are linked to male and female members of society, with no two overlapping. Men are seen to be strong and emotionless whilst women are expected to show their emotions and are seen as submissive and gentle. For example, if a woman is seen to cry at an emotional moment in a movie, in a public cinema for instance, no individual around her would glance or question it, but if a male viewer was seen to cry openly and express such intense emotion, he may be exposed to ridicule or judgement. How fair this situation may be is often debated. For this paper the question of how such

judgements occur will attempt to be answered. Why have social actors been encouraged to accept such stereotypes as a given? Why do individuals therefore find themselves accepting these roles for themselves?

To understand gender identity it is important to make a distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'. 'Sex' involves the biological and physical differences between men and women, whilst gender is culturally and socially learnt. Terminology such as 'male' and 'female' are sex based categories; however 'masculine' and 'feminine' are gendered categories. An individual's sex is a biological fact that is the same in any culture or society, nonetheless sex categorisation means, in terms of gender role as 'man' or 'woman', can be viewed extremely differently across cultures (WHO 2013). These gender roles can have a lasting impact in an individual's public and private identity. Although often used interchangeably, sex and gender are clearly different characteristics. Gender involves social customs, attributes and behaviours whereas sex can be seen as a more personal demonstration of such characteristics. In its simplest form sex is biological and gender is sociological.

'Gender role' is seen sociologically as the characteristics and behaviours that society can attribute to the sexes. What it means to be a 'real man', in any society requires a male to be both recognised biologically as a man plus what the culture of that society defines as masculine characteristics and behaviours, likewise a 'real woman' needs biological female attributes and feminine characteristics. Such stereotypical features are clearly defined for each sex, with those who break such 'guidelines' being seen as deviant, outcasts in their given society. This paper will look further into what are <https://assignbuster.com/socialisation-is-a-fundamental-sociological-concept-sociology-essay/>

expected gender behaviours and the sociological explanations for these expected personas.

Gendered differences can depend on the given society and the cultural values, economic system, history and family structures that it holds, and are thoroughly maintained through these mediums. As a result of this a continuous 'loop-back effect' between so called gendered institutions and the social construction of gender within individuals can be seen to exist (West and Zimmerman 1987)

Gender identity goes beyond just recognising the physical biological gender characteristics belonging to male and female and identifying them from each other. Gender identity is in fact an internal and personal conception of how individuals view themselves as male or female and therefore how they conduct their actions within society. 'Gender cannot be equated with biological and physiological differences between human males and females. The building blocks of gender are socially constructed' (Lorber 1994: 17).

As a social group, communities are embedded with gender, all members experience gender constructed experiences throughout their childhood, adolescence and eventually adulthood. These experiences are reproduced in and through those that they interact with. To what extent individuals accept the expected gender roles they are shown is debateable although no matter how much or how little they see themselves as masculine or feminine, gender can still influence their day to day existence.

British sociology saw the only significant form of stratification within any given society was that of class. The term gender wasn't mentioned in early <https://assignbuster.com/socialisation-is-a-fundamental-sociological-concept-sociology-essay/>



sociological thought, with any reference to difference between men and women categorised and referred to as 'sex'. Sex being considered as an important and influential sociological concept only came into consideration with the emerging and developing feminist perspectives of the 1970's. Feminists had to fight through traditional theories to change existing thought on the concept of differences and inequalities brought about by an individual's gender and sex identity.

Socialisation is a fundamental sociological concept and can be applied to many areas of society that are seen as important to sociological study. As highlighted earlier, socialisation is defined as the way in which an individual learns to become part of a group, including wider civilization, as well as their small immediate environment and community. Socialisation begins the moment an individual is born, and they encounter different degrees of the process throughout all their life stages in order to help them adapt to each and every social group they encounter. Socialisation also helps to equip a social actor with the tools they need to cope and bend with any changes that may occur within their existing social group. Given the importance of socialisation within the discipline of sociology as a whole, concentrating on a focused area of socialisation can help with building a general knowledge that can be applied to further study of sociology and its topics. Gender is something that is experienced and encountered by all members of any given society and there are many different theories about what exactly affects an individual's gender socialisation, but this paper shall focus on early socialisation and the influence family life can have in the socialisation process.

## Parental influence on gender identity

A child's initial experiences come from their parents; therefore as a result their first experience with gender identity also comes from their close family environment. With the advancement in technology, expectant parents can learn the sex of their unborn child as early as 14-16 weeks into a pregnancy (nhs. co. uk). From that moment the words 'it's a boy/girl!' leave the technicians mouth, gender expectations begin. The most innocent of tasks such as buying a baby's first blanket is gendered. A pretty pink flowered one for your baby girl is associated with the expectation that she will be soft and delicate, whereas purchasing a vivid blue truck covered blanket for the soon to be baby boy, can be seen to set him up to be strong and tough.

Associating such gender traits in a simple act may seem extreme but it is just the start of teaching a child what is expected from their gender.

The process of gender socialization can be seen to begin in the context of the family (McHale et al., 2003). The family unit is the environment that a child is introduced to the world in and what their developing gender demands. Although many factors are seen to have an influence on the socialisation of a child and teaching them what is expected from their gender, parents are seen to act as the principle source of socialisation, the primary socialising agents of a child's gender roles. (Block, 1983; Witt, 1997).

Studies have shown that gendered treatment of children is evident in the first 24 hours after birth. Children internalize what they see from their parent's behaviour and by the age of two, they have a compressive

awareness of the difference in sex roles. Ruble and Martin (1998) studied preschool children whose socialisation had only occurred at home (primary) and saw that children showed awareness of stereotyped gender traits. They could recognise males as having a higher power than females, but also associated negative connotations with a male figure, such as anger or unfriendliness, whereas they saw women as having less significant social standing but associated with positive traits such as kindness and approachableness.

Children also demonstrated to discover gender identity through their own gendered perception. For instance, when asked to assign a sex or gender to a neutral doll, a girl would use female associations similar to them, whereas a boy child would make the doll into a male and demonstrate traits that are associated to society's masculine gendered attributes. Parents are seen to encourage such gendered behaviour by adhering to sex-based toys and games for their children, which have a heavy influence in the construction of gender identity and stereotypes. While both mothers and fathers contribute to the gender stereotyping of their children, fathers have been found to reinforce gender stereotypes more often than mothers do (Ruble, 1988). Lytton and Romney (1991) conducted a meta-analysis of 172 parents and their treatment of the boy versus girl children they were raising. Within this study, Lytton and Romney discovered that out of multiple identified socialisation areas; the only area that showed mothers and fathers treating children differently was giving them activities based on their separate genders. Giving boys and girls activities initially based on their sex, resulted in an enforcement of gender roles and becoming gender orientated.

Encouraging their daughters to play house or with dolls and prams, or by allowing their sons to play with trucks or building blocks, parents may both knowingly and unknowingly be encouraging their child's future gendered persona.

Perhaps due to an influence of western culture norms, Lytton and Romney saw that parents scold and punish boys more severely in the advent of misbehaving or going out of their gendered expectations, then that they do with female children. This idea shall be further explored in a later section of this paper.

A further study, this time by Cowan and Hoffman (1986), saw that a child's first words are also seen as gendered. For instance, being taught to assign a different name to each of their parents, mother for female carer and father for male carer, demonstrates how parental influence takes place. Hoffman also noted that the